



**DECISION NOTICE for the Draft Environmental Assessment:
Seven Sisters WMA Agricultural Lease
Region 7 Headquarters
PO Box 1630, Miles City, MT 59301
(406) 234-0900**

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

Seven Sisters WMA was purchased by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to maintain a woodland/cropland complex to benefit a diversity of wildlife while maximizing hunting opportunities, primarily for white-tailed deer and pheasants. The proposed action is to continue a sharecrop agreement on 223 ac of the WMA with a long-time, competent lessee. The lessee will cultivate and retain a portion of the hay/grain crop harvest, leaving the remaining crop standing for wildlife use during winter months.

The benefit and purpose the lease is to provide winter habitat and forage, primarily for wintering pheasants, deer, and turkeys. The WMA annually winters an average 250 white-tailed deer. Standing crops also benefit migrating waterfowl and a variety of other wildlife species. The area is open to public hunting during all commission-approved seasons, and provides opportunity for deer, upland game bird, and waterfowl hunting.

The WMA has been under an agricultural lease with the same lessee since 2004. The lessee has shown initiative on both the previously-leased WMA and the new acquisition to utilize farming practices that increase the productivity of the land. These include fertilizing and conditioning the soil, treating of noxious weeds, and maintaining fields in good condition. The lessee has fulfilled all conditions of previous leases entered into with MFWP.

ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSED ACTION:

Alternative A: No Action:

Agricultural lease will not be renewed and agricultural lands will not be cultivated. This alternative would require MFWP to commit resources to manage weeds on the previously cultivated 323 acres of farm fields. Wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of wintering habitat and food resources.

Alternative B: Proposed Action:

Agricultural lease will be renewed for 323 ac of cropland. Wildlife will benefit because high-quality wintering habitat and forage will be available. The lessee(s), MFWP and sportsmen will mutually benefit through the sharecrop agreement.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS:

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Seven Sisters Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease) on January 27, 2014 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on February 16, 2014.

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in the *Glendive Ranger Review* and the *Sidney Herald*. Copies of the environmental assessment were distributed to neighboring landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments"). An FWP statewide news release was issued and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases").

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 4 total comments. Three comments were in support of the proposed action. One comment suggested a modification to the proposed lease. Comments can be viewed in their entirety in Appendix A.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

Below is a summary of comments and FWP responses.

Comment: I have hunted pheasants on SS for a number of years and would like to recommend that you attempt to get more grain-crops going there. There is a definite lack of good food for pheasants on the area and the hay cutting just reduces the amount of cover for pheasants to nest, loaf and hide in also. Not a good management strategy, in my opinion.

FWP Response: The majority of the agricultural plan calls for grain-crop production. There are currently no acres of irrigated alfalfa hay on the WMA, although a small portion of the WMA (<20 acres) may be planted to alfalfa during the 3-year lease, which would benefit both deer and pheasants since 35% of the field must be left standing in every year. Areas that may be cut dry-land hay are currently dominated by brome grass and provide minimal wildlife benefit. Depending on spring/summer weather conditions and logistics, these fields may be cut for hay, left idle, or converted to small grain production to begin the process of converting the field to dense nesting cover and/or perennial food plots. Lease conditions stipulate that dry land hay fields will not be cut before July 15 to protect nesting hens—this wording was added to the agricultural plan in Appendix C of the EA.

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed action.

FWP's analysis supports the agricultural lease of Seven Sisters WMA as proposed. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the continuation of the agricultural lease for Seven Sisters WMA.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> or be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 7 Headquarters, P.O. Box 1630, Miles City, Mt. 59301 (406) 234-0900.



Brad R. Schmitz
R7 Regional Supervisor

February 25, 2014

Date

APPENDIX A
PUBLIC COMMENTS – SEVEN SISTERS WMA AGRICULTURAL LEASE

Subject: Public Comment: Seven Sisters WMA Agriculture Lease Environmental Assessment
Monday, February 10, 2014 10:29 AM

Name: Tim Sowa

City: East Helena

I have hunted the Sea Sisters over the years. I know that this lease would be good for the deer and pheasants.

Subject: Public Comment: Seven Sisters WMA Agriculture Lease Environmental Assessment
Tuesday, February 04, 2014 4:36 PM

Name: Brian

City: Harrison

Alternative B sounds like the only way to go. Good for everyone involved, especially the wildlife.

Subject: Hay Lease on Seven Sisters
Friday, January 31, 2014 7:26 PM

I have hunted pheasants on SS for a number of years and would like to recommend that you attempt to get more grain-crops going there. There is a definite lack of good food for pheasants on the area and the hay cutting just reduces the amount of cover for pheasants to nest, loaf and hide in also. Not a good management strategy, in my opinion. Thank you, Gary Schnicke, 2117 Kyd Rd., Three Forks, MT 59752

Subject: Public Comment: Seven Sisters WMA Agriculture Lease Environmental Assessment
Friday, January 31, 2014 10:35 AM

Name: James Miller

City: Crane, MT

I believe that sharecropping this acreage is a win/win for all involved. I support continuing this for the next 3 years